THE SEAL AND THE FLAME

Mani, Shapur I, and the Politics of Divine Revelation

in Third-Century Persia, c. 216–293 CE

PART ONE

The World Mani Entered and What Mani Said He Was

At Naqsh-e Rostam, six kilometers northwest of Persepolis, a vertical cliff face carries within a few meters of stone the most compressed record of political ambition and institutional conflict in the third-century Persian world. The Achaemenid kings carved their tombs into the rock here — Darius the Great, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, Darius II — each tomb façade cut to the same cruciform template, each registering a dynasty's claim to cosmic legitimacy through sheer permanence. The Sasanian kings, who came four centuries later and understood themselves as the Achaemenid tradition's rightful heirs, added their own monuments to the same cliff: triumphal reliefs, victory scenes, investiture ceremonies showing the king receiving his ring of power from Ahura Mazda himself. Shapur I, the greatest military king of the early Sasanian period, placed at Naqsh-e Rostam the relief that would become the most celebrated image of Roman humiliation in any ancient medium. Three Roman emperors appear beneath the king's mounted figure: Gordian III dead beneath the horse's hooves, Philip the Arab on his knees, and Valerian — the only Roman emperor ever captured alive in battle — held by the wrist in Shapur's grip. The king who commissioned this image was not a man who needed external validation for his authority. He had made his case in stone and flesh.

Just to the right of Shapur's triumph, on the same monument complex, a second man inscribed his own text into the stone. His name was Kartir — also spelled Kerdir, Kerdēr, in various scripts — and he was a Zoroastrian priest who had begun his career as a minor cleric in Ardashir I's court and who would, over the course of fifty years of service to four successive Sasanian kings, transform the religious landscape of an empire. Kartir is the only non-royal individual in Sasanian history to have carved his own independent inscriptions at the empire's most sacred rock monuments. He left four: at Naqsh-e Rajab, at the Ka'ba-ye Zardosht, at Naqsh-e Rostam itself, and at Sar Mashhad. In these texts he describes what he built, what he destroyed, and what he personally witnessed in a journey to the afterlife that confirmed everything he had spent his career defending.

The two men who inscribed themselves into the same stone monument complex at Naqsh-e Rostam — Shapur I, whose patronage would give a prophet thirty years of freedom to preach across a continent, and Kartir, whose institutional maneuvering would end that prophet's life in chains — are the study's two poles. Between them stands Mani, who was born in 216 CE near Ctesiphon in Babylonia, received his first divine communication at the age of twelve, founded a world religion, accompanied the greatest Sasanian king on his military campaigns, wrote seven canonical scriptures, sent missionaries to every corner of the known world, was arrested, tried, imprisoned, and died around 276/277 CE — all within the political orbit of the empire whose two

competing claims to authority, royal and priestly, had made his rise possible and his death inevitable.

This study examines what that orbit was, what Mani said he was, and what the political economy of his career reveals about the relationship between revelation, institutional interest, and organized violence in a world where all three operated simultaneously and none could be understood in isolation from the others.

Section I: Foundation Conditions — The Sasanian Political Landscape and the Priestly Problem

I.A — The Founding Bargain: Ardashir, the Magi, and the Mutual Benefit of Appropriation

The Sasanian dynasty that Ardashir I founded in 224 CE by defeating the last Parthian king at the Battle of Hormozdgan was, from its first months, a project of political theology as much as military conquest. Ardashir came from Pars, the heartland of ancient Iranian civilization and the region most densely associated with Zoroastrian religious practice. His family had administered the fire temple at Istakhr, one of the great sacred fires of the Iranian world, for generations before his military rise, which meant that his political claim was inseparable from a religious identity he had not needed to manufacture — it had been his inheritance. When he proclaimed himself Shahanshah, King of Kings, he simultaneously proclaimed himself the guardian of the sacred fires that Zoroastrian cosmology placed at the center of right cosmic order, and he identified the Magi — the hereditary Zoroastrian priestly class — as the institutional embodiment of that order.

The arrangement the Sasanian founders negotiated with the Magi was appropriation in the analytical framework's precise sense: the dynasty did not invent a new religion; it captured the interpretive infrastructure of an existing one. Zoroastrianism had deep roots in Iranian culture that antedated any particular dynasty by centuries; the Magi had maintained their institutional presence through the Parthian period's relative religious pluralism; the sacred fires at Istakhr, at Adur Farnbag, at Adur Gushnasp had been burning, with various degrees of institutional organization, long before Ardashir's grandfather was administering temple affairs in Pars. What Ardashir did was to make this pre-existing tradition the explicit ideological foundation of state power — to declare that the Sasanian king's authority derived from Ahura Mazda, that the king's

victories were Ahura Mazda's victories, that the sacred fires burning throughout the empire were the material manifestation of divine order that royal power existed to protect.

The material terms of the bargain were specific: the Magi received state protection of their fire temples and the agricultural estates supporting them; legal authority over personal status questions within Zoroastrian communities; official recognition of the priestly hierarchy's social position within the empire's class structure; and the right to collect the religious dues that sustained the priestly economy. In exchange, the Magi provided the dynasty's investiture ceremonies, the ritual blessing of military campaigns, the cosmological framework that made the king's authority meaningful to his subjects, and — perhaps most importantly — the institutional network of literate, locally embedded religious professionals who could transmit royal legitimacy into communities that no army could reach by force alone. The exchange was genuine and mutually beneficial. Neither party was fooled about what it was doing. The dynasty needed the Magi's legitimating services, and the Magi needed the dynasty's protection and resource flows. Both parties knew this, and both parties behaved accordingly.

The constraint this created for the royal house was real and would shape the dynasty's religious politics for the next four centuries. A king who needed priestly legitimation was a king who could not simply ignore priestly institutional interests when they conflicted with royal preferences. The Zoroastrian Magi's ability to withhold or conditionally grant religious sanction — the Achaemenid parallel of refusing to perform the investiture, of withdrawing blessings from military campaigns, of declaring the king's rule cosmically illegitimate — was not a frequently exercised threat, but it was a structural possibility that any sophisticated Sasanian king understood. The Constraint-Capture Spectrum, in the analytical framework's terms, placed the early Sasanian state well toward the constrained end: the king needed the priesthood more than the priesthood needed any particular king, because the priestly institutional network could survive a change of dynasty in ways that no individual king's political authority could.

I.B — The Religious Landscape Shapur I Inherited

The Sasanian Empire that Shapur I inherited from his father Ardashir in 240/241 CE was not Zoroastrian in any sociologically meaningful sense despite its official theology. Its territories extended from the Euphrates to the Indus, from the Caucasus to the Persian Gulf, and across that geographic range they encompassed a religious diversity that the Magi's institutional network had neither the reach nor the cultural authority to homogenize. The ancient Jewish

communities of Babylonia were among the largest diaspora concentrations anywhere in the ancient world, concentrated around the Tigris-Euphrates flood plain in communities with deep roots, well-established internal governance structures — the Exilarchate, the great academies at Sura and Pumbedita whose scholarly traditions would eventually produce the Babylonian Talmud — and economic networks that made them indispensable to the empire's commercial life. These communities were not hostile to Persian rule; the Achaemenid tradition of Jewish-Persian accommodation had deep historical roots, and Babylonian Jewish communities had generally found Sasanian governance preferable to Roman. But they were not Zoroastrian, and no Zoroastrian priestly authority exercised any meaningful jurisdiction over their internal religious life.

The Christian communities growing rapidly throughout Mesopotamia and Syria presented a more complex administrative problem. Christianity in the third century was not yet the imperially sponsored faith it would become after Constantine; it was a socially diverse, intellectually vigorous, and institutionally developing movement that drew adherents from across the class spectrum in the empire's Aramaic-speaking urban centers. In the Sasanian Empire, Christian communities occupied an ambiguous position: they were subjects whose labor and commercial activity the state valued, but their connections to the Roman Empire — their theological tradition rooted in a Palestinian province, their institutional links to communities in Roman Syria and Egypt, their eventual association with Rome's official religion after 312 CE — made them politically suspect in ways that the Jewish communities, with no comparable imperial power as patron, were not. Shapur I's relationship to Christian communities would fluctuate between tolerance and pressure depending on the current state of Sasanian-Roman military relations, a pattern that would persist for centuries.

Eastward, in the territories the Sasanians had inherited from the Parthians along the old Silk Road routes, Buddhist communities maintained presence in trading cities and monastery networks that extended from Central Asia into the empire's eastern provinces. South of the Mesopotamian heartland, Mandaean communities practiced their ancient baptismal tradition along the rivers of the marshland regions, with priestly lineages claiming descent from John the Baptist and observances that bore no relationship to Zoroastrian categories. In the cities — Ctesiphon, Seleucia, Gundeshapur — various Gnostic, syncretic, and philosophically sophisticated movements circulated among educated populations accustomed to religious eclecticism as an intellectual style as much as a spiritual commitment. And across all of this, the Iranian population itself, which was Zoroastrian in formal affiliation but whose actual practice

encompassed local cult traditions, agricultural festivals, and household observances that Zoroastrian priestly orthodoxy had not yet succeeded in standardizing into a unified institutional form.

Governing this landscape through a Zoroastrian priestly monopoly had structural costs that Shapur I was better positioned than most of his predecessors to calculate clearly, because he was also the ruler who had defeated three Roman emperors. A king of his military stature did not face the same vulnerability to priestly pressure that a king in a contested succession or a military setback would have faced. The political space that military dominance creates is real and measurable: Shapur could experiment with religious policy in ways that his successors, whose positions were more precarious, could not afford. His toleration of religious diversity — explicitly documented in sources that describe his willingness to let Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and eventually Manichaeans practice freely within his empire — was not indifference to the governance functions of belief. It was a calculation that a single priestly establishment's monopoly created frictions his empire's religious diversity could not absorb without political cost.

I.C — Kartir in the Background: Building While Shapur Tolerates

Throughout Shapur I's reign, a young Zoroastrian priest named Kartir was doing something that his king's policy of religious tolerance was making both more urgent and more difficult. He was building the institutional infrastructure of Zoroastrian orthodoxy — fire temples, priestly networks, judicial authority, canonical standards — with the systematic patience of a man who understood that the moment of tolerance he was living through was not permanent and that the institutions he built during it would determine what kind of religious landscape the next moment of less tolerant royal policy would find waiting for it.

Kartir appears in Shapur I's own Ka'ba-ye Zardosht inscription — the great trilingual monument at Naqsh-e Rostam — as a minor administrative presence: he is listed, but without the titles that would later accumulate around his name. His own inscriptions later describe the Shapur years as a period of service without adequate reward — he performed his functions, built his institutions, organized the priestly hierarchy, but did not receive the promotions and titles he believed his work merited. This complaint, made in stone for public reading, tells us something analytically significant: Kartir understood his position under Shapur as constrained by the king's toleration policy, and he understood that constrained position as temporary. He was accumulating institutional capital — fire temples endowed, priestly networks organized, judicial

precedents established, orthodox standards propagated — in the expectation that a different king with different priorities would eventually arrive and find a different institutional landscape waiting for them.

The fire temple economy that Kartir was expanding during Shapur's reign was the material foundation of everything else. A fire temple was not merely a ritual site; it was an economic institution. Its endowment typically included agricultural land whose revenues sustained the priests who served it, funded the priestly education system that trained the next generation, and enabled the performance of the expensive liturgical ceremonies — the yasna, the gahambar festivals, the elaborate purification rituals — that constituted the Magi's professional service offering. Each new fire temple Kartir established was a new economic node in the institutional network, generating revenue, training personnel, embedding priestly authority in a local community's social fabric in ways that could survive any individual king's preferences. By the time Shapur died in 270 CE, Kartir had built an institutional network substantially more extensive than the one he had inherited from his predecessors, entirely within the political space that Shapur's toleration policy had, paradoxically, left available.

I.D — The Man Who Would Present Himself to the King: Mani Before the Mission

Mani was born in 216 CE, during Ardashir I's rise and the dynasty's founding convulsions, in a village near Ctesiphon in Babylonia — at the political center of the empire whose patronage he would spend his adult life seeking and whose priestly establishment would eventually kill him. His father Patteg, a man of Iranian descent, had joined an Elchasaite baptismal community in Babylonia sometime before Mani's birth, drawn by what appears to have been a personal conversion experience, and Mani was raised within this community from the age of four. The Elchasaites were a Jewish-Christian group whose practice centered on repeated ritual immersion, strict dietary regulations including vegetarianism, and the cultivation of agricultural purity as a spiritual discipline. Their theology drew on Jewish apocalyptic literature, on syncretic elements from the eastern Christian tradition, and on the baptismal focus that connected them to traditions associated with John the Baptist. They were, by any measure, a hybrid community, assembled from elements of multiple traditions into a coherent if minority religious identity.

What growing up in an Elchasaite community in third-century Babylonia provided was not doctrine — Mani would eventually break comprehensively with the Elchasaites' theology and practice — but intellectual exposure. Ctesiphon and its surrounding communities were

positioned at the crossroads of the ancient world's major religious traditions. Zoroastrian practice was the dominant Persian cultural form surrounding the community from the outside. Jewish tradition permeated the Elchasaite framework from the inside. Christian teaching in various forms circulated through the community's theological inheritance. Buddhist texts and teachers traveled through the region along the Silk Road's western extensions. Gnostic cosmological frameworks, elaborated through generations of speculative theology in the Mesopotamian intellectual environment, were available to any literate person with access to the trading city's religious marketplace. Mani had access to all of this by virtue of where he was born and who his father had become. He did not need to travel to find the materials that would constitute his synthesis; he was born into an environment where the synthesis was, in embryo, already available.

The Cologne Mani Codex, a fifth-century parchment book found in Egypt in the 1960s and fully published between 1975 and 1982, provides what no other ancient religious founding case can offer: early biographical accounts of the religious founder compiled from first-generation community sources, preserved in Greek translation, recording details of Mani's life that his community understood as essential to the mission's meaning. The codex is tiny — 4.5 by 3.8 centimeters, the smallest ancient book ever discovered — and its contents are correspondingly dense: biographical fragments, citations from Mani's own writings, accounts from named early disciples who had known him personally. It is the primary source for what Mani himself said about the experiences that launched his mission, and it is the foundation on which Section II's account of those experiences is built.

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Section II: What Mani Said He Was — The Claims, in Mani's Own Voice

What follows is an account of Mani's revelatory claims, his doctrinal system, and his institutional architecture, drawn from Mani's own canonical texts and from his community's earliest preserved accounts of his life. The framework of this study — which analyzes belief systems as governance infrastructure and measures their political functions through material outcomes — is deliberately held in abeyance through this section. Mani's claims are presented as Mani presented them: in their full scope, from their own sources, with the internal logic that made

them persuasive to hundreds of thousands of people across four continents over more than a millennium. Part Two will examine the political landscape into which Mani carried these claims.

II.A — The First Revelation: The Twin

Mani was twelve years old, growing up in the Elchasaite community in Babylonia, when he received his first communication from what he described as al-Tawm — the Twin, in Aramaic. The Twin was a heavenly being, a divine counterpart attached to Mani from birth, his spiritual companion in the celestial realm whose task was to guide him toward his earthly mission. Mani's community preserved his own account of this first encounter, and the Cologne Mani Codex records it: the Twin came to him and told him that he was not yet to eat meat, not yet to drink wine, not yet to have sexual relations with a woman — the three primary ascetic disciplines that would define the Elect tier of the Manichaean church — because he had not yet come of age. His time had not arrived. He should remain within the Elchasaite community and observe its practices, but he should understand that the time of his public mission was coming.

For twelve years after this first encounter, Mani continued living within the Elchasaite community while maintaining his private knowledge of his heavenly Twin's existence and his own future mission. The Cologne Mani Codex suggests that this period was not passive waiting but active intellectual and spiritual development — Mani was learning, reading, absorbing the various religious traditions his environment made available, and presumably working through the cosmological synthesis that would become the doctrinal content of his revelation. His father Patteg, according to the tradition, received independent visions during this period urging him to raise his son with specific disciplines; the family's involvement in the Elchasaite community provided the institutional context within which Mani's formation occurred, even as his private revelatory experience distinguished him from the community that surrounded him.

When Mani was twenty-four, the Twin came again. The time had arrived. The second revelation, as Mani's community preserved it, was more urgent and specific than the first: Mani was to go public, to separate himself from the Elchasaite community, to declare openly the teaching that the Twin had been preparing him to receive and transmit. The message was not merely that Mani had a private spiritual insight to share; it was that he had been chosen, prepared from birth, and timed for this historical moment as a matter of cosmic purpose. He was the apostle whose mission would complete what previous apostles had begun and failed to finish. He was to go — first to his father, then to the world.

The break with the Elchasaites that followed was not violent, but it was comprehensive. The Cologne Mani Codex records a series of disputes with the community's elders over specific practices — the ritual immersion that the Elchasaites placed at the center of purification, the agricultural piety that structured their dietary regulations — which Mani argued were theologically incoherent and spiritually ineffective. These disputes were not merely procedural; they were the public working-out of the theological system that the Twin had been revealing to him, a system whose cosmological premises made the Elchasaite baptismal practice not merely insufficient but actively based on a misunderstanding of where purity resided and how liberation was achieved. Mani left the community, began gathering his first disciples from within his own extended family — his father Patteg and his brothers among the first converts — and launched his first missionary journey.

II.B — The Seal of the Prophets: The Universal Claim

Mani called himself the Seal of the Prophets. The claim appears across multiple Manichaean sources — in the Kephalaia, the great compendium of Mani's teachings preserved in Coptic, in the Manichaean hymn literature from Central Asia, in the accounts of his teaching preserved in Arabic by al-Biruni and Ibn al-Nadim centuries later, and in the anti-Manichaean polemics of writers like Augustine who engaged with the claim directly and understood its scope. The title means the final prophet, the one whose revelation completes and supersedes all previous revelations — a claim Islam would later make for Mohammed in a nearly identical formulation, more than three centuries after Mani's death, deploying the same title in the same prophetic tradition's framework.

What the title meant in Mani's own usage is recoverable from the theological architecture that supported it. Mani taught that truth had been revealed multiple times, through multiple prophets, to multiple peoples. Zoroaster had been a genuine prophet: he had received authentic divine knowledge and transmitted genuine wisdom to the Iranian people. The Buddha had been a genuine prophet: he had received authentic insight and established authentic practice for the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. Jesus had been a genuine prophet: he had brought authentic redemptive teaching to the peoples of the West. These were not false prophets whose revelations Mani was correcting; they were true prophets whose revelations had been incompletely preserved. Each of them had made the same mistake, or rather — and here Mani's formulation became precise and pointed — each of them had failed to prevent their followers from making the same mistake. They had not committed their revelations to writing in their own

hands, in their own voices, in a form that could be authenticated and preserved intact across generations. Their followers had transmitted the revelation orally, had allowed interpolation and corruption to enter the tradition, had assembled written texts from community memory long after the prophet's death rather than from the prophet's own dictation. What each tradition now contained of genuine revelation was surrounded and obscured by human error, by institutional distortion, by the accumulated weight of interpretation that had accumulated in the absence of an authoritative written text.

Mani's mission was to recover the genuine revelation embedded in all three traditions, to clarify what each prophet had truly taught as distinct from what tradition had added, and to complete the revelation that all three had begun — to say, finally and definitively, what Zoroaster and the Buddha and Jesus had each been revealing a portion of. And then, crucially, to commit this complete and clarified revelation to writing himself. Not to dictate to a community who would write it down after his death. Not to speak in parables that followers would interpret. To write it himself, in his own hand, in multiple languages, in canonical texts whose authority derived from the prophet's own authorship rather than from institutional transmission after the fact. The Seal of the Prophets was the prophet who could not be superseded because he had already incorporated all previous revelations and had preserved his own in a form that foreclosed the corruption that had overtaken his predecessors.

The universalist ambition embedded in this claim was explicit and its implications were operational. A religion that presented itself as the completion of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism simultaneously was a religion with low doctrinal adoption costs for populations from all three traditions. A Zoroastrian who encountered Manichaean missionaries found a system that honored Zoroaster as a genuine prophet and incorporated Iranian cosmological language into its framework. A Christian who encountered Manichaean missionaries found a system that honored Jesus as a genuine revealer and placed his teaching at the center of its Western mission. A Buddhist who encountered Manichaean missionaries found a system that honored the Buddha as a genuine teacher of liberation and incorporated Buddhist categories of renunciation and enlightenment into its practice. The synthesis was not merely theological; it was a missionary strategy of the highest order, designed from its inception to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries that any tradition committed to a single prophetic lineage and a single cultural framework could not efficiently cross.

II.C — The Cosmology: Light, Darkness, and the Human Situation

The doctrinal content of Mani's revelation was a dualistic cosmological system of systematic elaboration unlike anything that any of the traditions he incorporated had produced. Where Zoroastrianism posited a cosmic conflict between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, between truth and the Lie, Mani's system gave this conflict a metaphysical architecture in which the conflict was not merely moral but ontological — not a conflict between good and evil forces operating within a single creation, but a collision between two absolutely distinct and eternal principles of being.

At the origin of all things are two realms: the Realm of Light and the Realm of Darkness. The Realm of Light is ruled by the Father of Greatness, characterized by five attributes of spiritual excellence — intelligence, wisdom, understanding, thought, and deliberation — and populated by a hierarchy of divine beings whose nature is wholly spiritual, wholly luminous, wholly good. The Realm of Darkness is its opposite in every dimension — chaotic, material, aggressive, characterized by the five attributes of darkness and their corresponding spiritual qualities — and ruled by the Prince of Darkness, who is not a fallen angel or a deficient creator but an eternal principle of matter and chaos coequal in antiquity, though not in nature, with the Father of Greatness.

The cosmological drama began when the Realm of Darkness, driven by its essential aggression, attacked the border of the Realm of Light. The Father of Greatness responded by producing a series of divine emanations — the Mother of Life, the First Man, and eventually the Living Spirit — who engaged in a cosmic battle with the forces of Darkness. In this battle the First Man was temporarily defeated and captured, his divine armor of five elements consumed by the Archons of Darkness, who incorporated particles of divine light into their own material substance. This cosmic catastrophe — the mixing of light and darkness — is the origin of the material world. The material cosmos is not a creation of benevolent divinity, as Zoroastrian theology taught; it is the consequence of a cosmic battle, the mixed product of light trapped in darkness, an emergency requiring resolution rather than a good creation requiring celebration.

The human being is the most concentrated expression of this mixture. The physical body is composed of the same dark matter as the rest of the material world — produced, in Manichaean teaching, by the Archons of Darkness from their own substance specifically as a prison designed to trap and obscure the divine light particles within. The soul — the true self, the divine element in each person — is a particle of light from the Realm of Light, imprisoned in material flesh as part of the catastrophe of the cosmic collision. Every human life is, at its deepest level,

the experience of divine light imprisoned in dark matter, yearning for release and return to the Realm of Light from which it came.

The entire cosmological drama — the mixing, the material world, human life, death, and the processes of the natural world — is the story of how the light particles are being progressively extracted from their material imprisonment and returned to their source. The sun and the moon are cosmic instruments of this liberation process, great ships of light that collect the released light particles and carry them back toward the Realm of Light. Plants contain higher concentrations of light particles than animal flesh, because plants grow toward the sun and accumulate its luminous substance. Water carries light particles. The processes of natural growth and decay are dimensions of the cosmic liberation project operating at scales both larger and smaller than human perception can easily track. Everything in the material world is participating, wittingly or unwittingly, in this drama of light's return.

II.D — The Institutional Architecture: Elect and Hearers

Mani's soteriology — his account of how human beings participate in the liberation of light — was inseparable from an institutional architecture that made the religion sustainable as a community across diverse cultural contexts. The architecture divided the Manichaean community into two tiers: the Elect and the Hearers.

The Elect were the ascetic specialists, the full practitioners of Manichaean discipline, the human instruments of light's liberation. They maintained the three seals that Mani's revelation prescribed: the seal of the mouth (no meat, no wine, no harmful speech), the seal of the hand (no harm to any living being, no agricultural labor that would destroy light particles embedded in plants and soil), and the seal of the breast (complete sexual abstinence and non-reproduction). These were demanding commitments, and the Elect bore them continuously rather than occasionally. They ate only plant-based foods prepared by Hearers rather than harvested by their own hands, since harvesting damaged the light particles in plants. They did not plant or cultivate, since agriculture involved killing plant matter. They walked carefully to avoid harming insects. They did not kindle fires, since fire was a luminous element requiring protection. They lived by the material support of the Hearers, and in exchange they performed the spiritual work that the tradition's soteriology assigned to full practitioners: the digestion of plant foods that released embedded light particles, the prayer and contemplation that participated in the cosmic liberation project, the teaching and liturgical functions that sustained the community's life.

The Hearers were the lay practitioners, the supporting community, those who had committed to the Manichaean revelation and its basic ethical requirements but who had not taken on the full ascetic discipline of the Elect. Hearers ate meat, married, had children, engaged in agriculture and commerce — the ordinary activities of material life — but did so within a framework of ethical orientation toward the tradition's goals. They gave alms to the Elect, providing the material support that sustained the Elect's ascetic life and mission. They observed the fasts, the prayer times, and the ritual observances that the tradition prescribed for lay practitioners. They accumulated religious merit through their support of the Elect's liberation work, and this merit — the Manichaean equivalent of the Buddhist concept of punya — improved the terms of their soul's liberation in subsequent existences, gradually working toward the full liberation that continuous life as an Elect member would accelerate.

The two-tier architecture was not merely a practical accommodation to human weakness, though it served that function admirably. It was a solution to the fundamental institutional problem that every demanding ascetic tradition faces: how to maintain a community of full practitioners whose discipline generates the tradition's spiritual authority while building a broader lay community that can fund and socially embed the specialists without itself bearing the full burden of practice. The Buddhist sangha had solved this problem through the monk-layperson distinction and the tradition of dana — lay giving to monks — that sustained the monasteries. The Manichaean elect-hearer structure was an independent development of the same functional solution, evolved in a different cultural context but addressing the same structural challenge with comparable institutional ingenuity.

What distinguished the Manichaean structure from most of its contemporaries was its portability. The Elect's discipline was self-contained and did not require fixed institutional infrastructure — no temple, no fire that required continuous maintenance, no land endowment that tied the community to a particular location. The Elect needed food, shelter, and clothing, which the Hearers provided wherever they traveled. The liturgy required texts and trained practitioners, which the Elect community maintained. The doctrinal tradition required canonical books, which Mani had written in multiple languages and had translated during his lifetime. A Manichaean community could be established wherever Elect missionaries arrived and found Hearers willing to support them, regardless of what political authority governed the territory. This portability was not accidental; it was the operational expression of Mani's explicit ambition to found a religion that would function across all civilizational boundaries.

II.E — The Written Canon: Solving the Transmission Problem

Mani produced seven canonical books during his lifetime. He wrote them himself, primarily in Aramaic, and oversaw their translation into Middle Persian, Parthian, and other languages during the period of his active mission. The Living Gospel, the Treasure of Life, the Pragmateia, the Book of Mysteries, the Book of the Giants, the Epistles, and the Psalms and Prayers: these were not posthumous compilations assembled by followers working from community memory. They were texts produced by the prophet himself, in his own voice, committed to writing as a deliberate act of institutional design aimed at preventing the corruption that Mani taught had overtaken the revelations of his predecessors.

He also produced illustrated works — the Arzhang, a pictorial book containing visual representations of Manichaean cosmology — specifically because visual instruction could reach audiences who could not read the written texts. A missionary tradition operating across the full range of the ancient world's literacy levels, from educated urban professionals to illiterate rural communities, required pedagogical tools calibrated for different audiences, and Mani built those tools from the beginning rather than leaving their development to institutional improvisation after his death. The illustrated books were, in this sense, a recognition that the transmission problem was not merely textual — that the same concern for accurate preservation of the revelation that drove his written canon also required visual translation for populations whose relationship to religious knowledge was primarily oral and visual rather than written.

The care with which Mani approached the textual preservation of his revelation was, within his own theological framework, consistent and self-explanatory. He had diagnosed the failure of previous prophets as a failure of transmission technology, and his response was to build the best available transmission technology into the founding act of the religion rather than leaving its development to the institutional improvisation of later generations. Whether his canonical texts were preserved as faithfully as he hoped is a question the subsequent history of Manichaean textual transmission partially answers: the discoveries of Manichaean texts at Medinet Madi in Egypt, at Dunhuang in China, at Turfan in Central Asia — texts preserved across more than a thousand years in communities geographically separated by the entire span of the ancient world — show a doctrinal coherence across time and space that suggests the transmission mechanism worked better than most ancient religious traditions managed to achieve.

II.F — The Universal Mission: Mani's Own Account of His Scope

The Manichaean Psalm-Book, preserved in Coptic and part of the Medinet Madi discoveries, contains what appears to be Mani's own account of his missionary journeys, in his own voice: 'In the last years of Ardashir the king I came out to preach. I crossed to the country of the Indians. I preached to them the hope of life. I chose in that place a good election. In the year that Ardashir the king died, Shapur his son became king. I crossed from the country of the Indians to the land of Persians; from the land of Persia I came to the land of Babylon, Mesene, and Susiana. I appeared before Shapur the king. He received me with great honour. He gave me permission to journey . . . preaching the word of life. I then spent some years in his retinue.'

The compressed autobiography in this passage — from India to Persia to Babylon, from Ardashir's last years to Shapur's court, the journey of a man who understood himself as on a planetary mission rather than a regional one — is the study's primary source for what the encounter between Mani and Shapur I was and what each party understood it to be. Mani appeared before Shapur the king. The king received him with great honor. He was given permission to journey preaching the word of life. He spent years in the royal retinue. This is the biographical record of the patronage relationship, in Mani's own words, preserved by his community as a matter of foundational institutional memory.

The mission's explicit ambition was global in a way that no previous religious founder had stated so programmatically. The Kephalaia records Mani's own formulation of why previous prophets had succeeded only partially: 'The writings and the wisdom and the apocalypses and the parables and the psalms of all the earlier churches were gathered from every side, and came to my church, and were added to the wisdom that I revealed. Like water that will be joined to water and becomes abundant water, so were the ancient books added to my writings, and became a great wisdom, such as has not been proclaimed to the generations of the world.' Previous prophets had taught one people, in one language, in one culture. Mani's revelation would gather all of them — and then go everywhere.

He sent missionaries in every direction simultaneously: Adda and Pattig to the Roman Empire and Egypt, establishing communities in Syria, Palestine, and North Africa within years of Mani's first mission; missionaries eastward along the Silk Road into the Parthian successor territories and eventually into Central Asia and China; missionaries into the Indian subcontinent, where Mani himself had preached in the early years before his royal audience. The missionary enterprise was not an afterthought or an institutional development of later generations; it was built into the founding architecture of the community, an expression of the same universalist

ambition that drove the synthesis of the revelation itself. A religion that claimed to complete and supersede all previous revelations was a religion that could not in consistency confine itself to any particular people or territory. Its logic required it to go everywhere, and Mani gave it the institutional tools — portable discipline, written canon, visual pedagogical materials, and a two-tier structure that could operate in any cultural context — to attempt the everywhere.

* * *

Part Two examines the political landscape into which Mani carried these claims.

THE SEAL AND THE FLAME

Mani, Shapur I, and the Politics of Divine Revelation

in Third-Century Persia, c. 216–293 CE

PART TWO

The Political Economy of Revelation

Shapur I received Mani with great honor. This is Mani's own testimony, preserved in the Manichaean Psalm-Book in his own first-person voice, and there is no reason to doubt the basic transaction it describes: a king renowned for military genius and for an interest in the diverse religious traditions of his enormous empire gave an audience to a sophisticated, literate, universalist religious teacher from his own capital region and decided to extend his protection rather than his hostility. The question that the encounter invites — and that the framework is designed to answer — is not whether Shapur found Mani's claims spiritually compelling, which is unknowable and analytically irrelevant, but what the arrangement between them did. What did Shapur gain from thirty years of Manichaean protection? What did the Zoroastrian priestly establishment stand to lose? What did the material competition between these two institutional networks look like in practice, and what governed its outcome?

These questions are the substance of Part Two. The register shift from Part One is deliberate and should be felt. Part One stayed inside Mani's own account of his mission, his claims, and his institutional architecture — because that account is the evidentiary foundation for everything that follows, and it deserves the full respect of being rendered on its own terms before analysis is applied. Part Two applies analysis. The same events, the same institutional relationships, the same thirty-year window of royal protection now appear in a different light: not as a prophet's mission, but as a political economy, with identifiable material stakes, identifiable winners and losers, and identifiable structural forces that made the arrangement's outcome predictable well before it occurred.

Section III: Legal Framework — Toleration as Instrument and Its Limits

III.A — What Royal Protection Actually Was

The legal foundation of Mani's mission in the Sasanian Empire was a letter of royal protection — documented in Manichaean sources, described in terms consistent with the personal royal patronage conventions of the ancient Near East, and real in its practical effects over three decades. The letter was not a law. It was not embedded in a legal code that could be invoked by Manichaean communities against hostile local authorities in Shapur's absence. It did not create institutional rights that any court could enforce independently of the political will of the current monarch. It was an expression of the current ruler's preferences, enforceable because the

current ruler had sufficient military and political dominance to make his preferences count, and valid precisely as long as that ruler remained in power and those preferences remained operative.

Understanding what the letter was — rather than what it might have been mistaken for — is essential to understanding the structure of the arrangement's vulnerability. Ancient royal protection in the Sasanian context operated through personal patron-client relationships rather than through impersonal legal institutions. The patron provided access, security, and resources; the client provided services, loyalty, and the specific kind of legitimating presence that the patron had calculated to be useful. When Shapur extended protection to Mani, he was performing an act of personal patronage that reflected his own assessment of Manichaean utility, not an act of legislation that would bind his successors. The distinction was not merely technical; it was the political fact on which Kartir's entire strategy would eventually turn.

What the letter provided in practical terms was substantial. Mani could travel throughout the Sasanian Empire without interference from local Zoroastrian authorities who might otherwise have found grounds to impede him. He could preach in cities where the Magi had established institutional presence. He could organize the two-tier Elect-Hearer community structure and begin accumulating the network of lay supporters whose alms sustained the Elect's mission. He could accompany the royal military campaigns — documented in his own biography — where he preached to prisoners of war and to the diverse populations of newly incorporated territories, exploiting the geographic reach that the empire's military operations provided. He could send missionaries beyond the empire's borders without those missionaries being understood as hostile foreign agents. The letter made all of this possible. Without it, the Manichaean mission in Persia would have faced the same institutional resistance that eventually eliminated it.

The non-Zoroastrian communities that occupied the empire's legal landscape alongside the Manichaean newcomers — the Jewish academies of Babylonia, the Christian communities of Mesopotamia and Syria, the Buddhist monasteries of the eastern territories — had achieved their tolerated status through different mechanisms and with different degrees of institutional durability. Jewish communities in Babylonia operated under the Exilarchate, a recognized hereditary governance structure that gave Jewish communal life an institutional form the Sasanian state could deal with through defined administrative channels. This gave the Jewish communities a degree of legal predictability that derived from their recognized institutional form rather than entirely from the current king's personal preferences. Christian communities in the

third century did not have a comparable recognized governance structure in the Sasanian context and accordingly occupied a more precarious position — tolerated during Shapur's reign partly because their persecution would have had adverse diplomatic implications with the Roman Empire, whose Christian communities Shapur preferred to cultivate as potential disruptive elements against Roman state cohesion.

The Manichaean community's legal situation was more precarious than either of these established minorities because it was newer, because it made more aggressive doctrinal claims that directly challenged Zoroastrian institutional authority in ways that Jewish or Christian practice did not, and because its legal standing derived entirely from personal royal patronage rather than from any recognized institutional form that the state had incorporated into its administrative framework. Mani was not the head of a recognized minority community with defined legal status and administrative precedent; he was a prophet with a king's letter, and the king was mortal.

III.B — The Governance Logic of Shapur's Toleration Policy

The conventional framing of Shapur I as a religiously tolerant king who was personally drawn to diverse traditions treats his toleration as an expression of character — the broad-minded monarch, curious about religion, unwilling to commit to the narrow orthodoxy his priestly establishment wanted to impose. This framing is not wrong as far as it goes, but it leaves the governance logic of the policy unexamined, and the governance logic is where the analytical substance lies.

Shapur I governed an empire whose territory had been assembled through military conquest across an enormous range of cultural and religious contexts. The Mesopotamian heartland — the most economically productive region, the source of the agricultural surplus and commercial revenue on which the empire's military capacity depended — was a landscape where Zoroastrian institutional infrastructure was thin and diverse religious communities were deeply rooted. The Jewish communities of Babylonia were not marginal populations that could be managed through the application of Zoroastrian religious law; they were economically significant, institutionally sophisticated, and connected to diaspora networks that extended far beyond Sasanian borders. Imposing Zoroastrian religious requirements on them would have created administrative friction without producing compliance, since the Magi had neither the

geographic reach nor the cultural authority to govern communities whose religious identity predated any Iranian state by centuries.

In the eastern territories — the former Parthian satrapies, the territories along the Silk Road approaches — Buddhist institutional presence was embedded in the commercial networks that made long-distance trade across Central Asia function. Buddhist monasteries along the Silk Road served as waypoints, financial intermediaries, and cultural brokers for the merchant communities whose activities generated the tariff revenues that made the Silk Road economically valuable to any empire that controlled sections of it. Antagonizing Buddhist communities in these territories by extending Zoroastrian institutional pressure would have damaged the commercial infrastructure that made the territories worth administering.

The governance logic of religious toleration in an empire of this diversity was therefore not primarily about theological latitude; it was about administrative efficiency. A single priestly establishment with exclusive monopoly on legitimate religious practice created administrative friction costs across the majority of the empire's territory, where the majority of its population did not share that practice and could not be converted into it at any speed that matched the rate at which the administrative friction was generating political costs. Shapur's toleration was not indifference to the governance function of belief — he understood that function with the clarity of a man who had conquered three Roman emperors. It was a calculation that the specific priestly monopoly the Magi were trying to establish was creating more governance costs than it was solving.

This is the political context that makes Mani's appearance before Shapur analytically coherent. A universalist synthesis that all three major religious traditions of the empire's territory could recognize as incorporating their own highest teachings was, from a governance perspective, a more efficient legitimating instrument than a Zoroastrian orthodoxy that required all non-Zoroastrians to recognize themselves as subjects of a foreign religious establishment. Whether Shapur calculated this consciously, unconsciously, or not at all is the sincerity question that the framework sets aside. What matters is what the arrangement produced: thirty years during which a universalist religious mission operated under royal protection, built institutional networks throughout the empire's diverse territories, and provided the court with a legitimating presence that could reach populations the Magi could not efficiently serve.

III.C — The Letter's Expiration and the Structural Prediction

The legal analysis of Shapur's patronage arrangement leads directly to the framework's most precise prediction for this case: the arrangement would end when the patron died and his successors faced different political constraints. This prediction does not require any specific knowledge of Shapur's successors' personal religious views, any intelligence about Kartir's succession strategy, or any detailed account of the political maneuvering between Mani's death and Kartir's apotheosis. It requires only the observation that a legal protection consisting entirely of personal royal patronage, without institutional embedding, without recognition in a standing legal code, without enforcement mechanisms independent of the patron's will — is a protection whose durability is exactly equal to the patron's political durability and no greater.

Shapur died in 270 CE. His son Hormizd I succeeded him and died after one year — too brief a reign for any significant policy change in either direction. When Bahram I took the throne in 271 CE, the legal situation of the Manichaean community was no longer what it had been under Shapur. The letter of protection was not renewed. The personal patronage relationship was not inherited. And Bahram I owed his position, as Part Three will examine in detail, to the institutional support of the man who had been patiently building his power throughout the entire period of Shapur's toleration. Within approximately three years of Shapur's death, Mani was in chains. The protection lasted exactly as long as the protector.

Section IV: Wealth Extraction — The Fire Temple Economy and the Competition for Community Resources

IV.A — What a Fire Temple Was

The Zoroastrian fire temple in the third-century Sasanian Empire was not primarily a place of worship in the sense that the term suggests to anyone formed by the Western religious tradition — a dedicated building where congregations assembled on a regular schedule to participate in collective ritual. The fire temple's primary function was the maintenance of the sacred fire itself: a perpetually burning flame that required continuous priestly attention, that could not be extinguished without ritual catastrophe, and that served as the material symbol of divine presence in a theological system where fire was the visible manifestation of Ahura Mazda's truth in the material world. The fire required priests. The priests required support. The support required land. And the land required administration — which the priests themselves provided,

making the fire temple a self-sustaining economic institution whose religious functions and economic functions were inseparable from each other at the level of institutional design.

The endowment of a fire temple in the Sasanian period typically included agricultural land whose revenues were dedicated to supporting the priests, funding the liturgical calendar, and maintaining the physical infrastructure of the temple itself. The Avestan legal tradition that the Magi were developing and codifying during this period included detailed provisions for the administration of temple endowments — how revenues were to be managed, how priests were to be compensated, what happened to endowments when priestly lineages died out or transferred their assignments. The fire temple was, in legal-economic terms, a perpetual charitable foundation: its assets were dedicated to a specific religious purpose in perpetuity, managed by a designated priestly class, and protected by the state in exchange for the state's access to the legitimating services that the priestly class provided.

The three great fires of the Iranian world — Adur Farnbag, the fire of the priests; Adur Gushnasp, the fire of the warriors; Adur Burzin-Mihr, the fire of the farmers — were the apex of a tiered hierarchy of sacred fires whose lower levels extended throughout the empire's Iranian-settled territories. Each of the three great fires was associated with one of the empire's three fundamental social classes and served as the ritual center of that class's religious life: the Adur Gushnasp at Takht-e Soleyman in Azerbaijan was the fire before which Sasanian kings came to give thanks for military victories, the fire whose maintenance was a matter of royal prestige and royal obligation, the fire that tied the warrior aristocracy's institutional identity to the Zoroastrian priestly framework that assigned their class its cosmic role. These great fires were not merely regional religious sites; they were the material infrastructure of a social order, and their endowments were among the largest single concentrations of agricultural wealth in the empire.

Kartir's career-long project of building new fire temples throughout the empire — explicitly enumerated in his own inscriptions as one of his primary achievements, described as extending even into newly conquered Roman territories in Syria and Cappadocia — was a project of territorial expansion of this institutional-economic network. Each new fire temple was a new node generating revenue, training priestly personnel, embedding Zoroastrian institutional authority in a local community's social fabric, and creating a local constituency whose material interests were aligned with the continuation of the Zoroastrian priestly system that had generated the temple and that depended on the temple's continued operation. By the time of

Shapur's death in 270 CE, the fire temple network Kartir had been building for thirty years under conditions of nominal royal tolerance represented an institutional-economic infrastructure of considerable scale — not equal to what it would become under subsequent centuries of Sasanian patronage, but already the largest concentrated religious institutional network in the empire.

IV.B — The Priestly Service Economy: What the Magi Sold and Who Paid

Beyond the fire temple endowments, the Zoroastrian priestly economy encompassed a service sector whose clients were the entire population of Zoroastrian-identified Iranians and whose service offering extended from birth to death and through every significant transition of communal and individual life. The priestly service economy was what modern economists would call a natural monopoly: the services it provided — the purification rituals that managed the contamination of death, the marriage ceremonies that established legally recognized kinship bonds, the agricultural festivals that marked the ritual calendar of the farming year, the healing prayers and protective rituals that addressed misfortune and illness — were not optional supplements to ordinary life but constitutive elements of the social order that Zoroastrian practice defined. A family that refused Zoroastrian priestly services was not merely making a religious choice; it was removing itself from the recognized social community whose bonds the priestly rituals established and maintained.

The fees for these services were substantial and, at the upper end of the social scale, very substantial. The yasna ceremony — the foundational Zoroastrian liturgy requiring specialist priestly performance — demanded trained officiants, significant preparation time, and specific ritual equipment. The bareshnum ritual for major purification from corpse contamination — a nine-day ceremony performed at specialized ritual sites by specialist priests — was among the most expensive services in the priestly economy. The installation of a new sacred fire or the consecration of a new fire temple required a full team of senior priests and represented a major investment by whatever royal or aristocratic patron was providing the endowment. At the pinnacle of the service economy, the great royal yasnas performed to mark military victories, coronations, and major dynastic events concentrated enormous resources in a single ritual performance — resources flowing directly to the priestly specialists who organized and executed them.

The priestly service economy was self-reinforcing in the same way the fire temple endowment system was: the revenue from priestly services funded the education system that trained new priests, who performed more services, who generated more revenue, who sustained more endowments. The gurukula-equivalent priestly schools — formal institutions of intensive training in Avestan liturgical language, ritual procedure, cosmological knowledge, and legal interpretation — required sustained funding, and that funding came from the service economy and the endowment system simultaneously. A boy entering priestly training in third-century Pars was entering a system that had been reproducing itself for generations, that had the organizational infrastructure to train him, employ him, and eventually establish him as a regional priestly specialist whose own service economy would in turn fund the next generation's training. The institutional resilience of the priestly system derived from this self-reinforcing structure: it did not depend on any single patron's generosity or any single political arrangement's continuation; it was embedded in the social fabric of every community it served.

IV.C — The Manichaean Economic Alternative and What It Displaced

The Manichaean two-tier system created an alternative institutional economy that competed with the fire temple network in ways that were specific, measurable, and directly threatening to the material interests of the priestly class. The mechanism of competition was the reallocation of lay religious expenditure: a family that committed to the Manichaean community and began supporting the local Elect with regular alms was a family that had redirected its religious patronage away from the priestly service economy. It was not paying for Zoroastrian ritual purification. It was not providing fees for the priestly ceremonies that marked the transitions of its social life. It was not contributing to the maintenance of the local sacred fire. It was instead feeding and clothing the Elect, funding their mission, accumulating merit through the mechanism of dana that the Manichaean system recognized rather than through the ritual fees that the Zoroastrian system demanded.

The competition was not geographically uniform. In the Iranian heartland — Pars, Media, the territories where Zoroastrian priestly infrastructure was deepest and local community identity was most thoroughly organized around Zoroastrian practice — Manichaean community formation faced the highest institutional resistance, because the social costs of withdrawing from Zoroastrian priestly services were highest in communities where those services were constitutive of social membership. In the empire's peripheral and multi-ethnic territories — Mesopotamia, the cities of the Silk Road, the diverse urban environments where no single

religious tradition had achieved the deep social embedding of the Iranian heartland's Zoroastrianism — Manichaean community formation faced lower resistance, because the social costs of religious reorientation were lower where the Zoroastrian priestly network was thinner.

This geographic gradient maps onto the Manichaean community's actual expansion pattern during the thirty years of Shapur's protection. The Manichaean mission's most rapid early growth was in precisely the regions where Zoroastrian priestly authority was weakest: the Aramaic-speaking communities of Mesopotamia, the Syrian and Palestinian territories on the empire's western borderlands, the diverse urban populations of Ctesiphon and the trading cities. Mani's own origin in the Aramaic-speaking Elchasaite community of Babylonia was not accidental context; it was the demographic profile of the mission's most receptive early audience. And the Manichaean missionaries who traveled westward into the Roman Empire found in the same demographic type — urban, literate, cosmopolitan, exposed to multiple religious traditions — the same receptive audience that had made the Babylonian mission successful.

For the Zoroastrian priestly establishment, the problem was not merely the immediate revenue loss from communities converting to Manichaean practice. It was the long-term institutional threat of a competing network achieving the kind of geographic embedding that would make it permanently difficult to displace. The fire temple economy had achieved its institutional durability by becoming constitutive of social life in the Iranian heartland over generations; it could not easily be transplanted into Mesopotamia or Syria on the same terms because the social structures that made it constitutive there did not exist there. Manichaeism, with its portable discipline and its syncretic universalism, was capable of achieving that constitutive embedding in precisely the regions where the fire temple economy could not. If given enough time, it would establish institutional roots in the empire's peripheral territories that would be as difficult to extirpate as the priestly roots in Pars. Time was what the letter of royal protection was buying.

IV.D — Shapur's Material Interest, Stated Plainly

The analytical question that the framework requires asking of Shapur's patronage arrangement is not what Shapur personally believed about Mani's revelation but what the arrangement produced materially and what Shapur's structural interests in that production were. The answer is available without any speculation about Shapur's inner states.

A king constrained by a priestly establishment whose institutional authority derived from sources independent of royal appointment faced a structural problem that was not resolvable through confrontation. Shapur could not suppress the Magi; they were too institutionally embedded, too socially necessary, too deeply integrated into the fabric of Iranian aristocratic life to be eliminated without destroying the social order that made the empire governable in its core territories. He could not simply ignore them; their legitimating services — investiture, military campaign blessing, the royal yasnas that marked the dynasty's cosmic sanction — were services whose withdrawal would have political costs he preferred not to incur. He was constrained, and he knew it.

A competing religious institutional network, operating throughout the empire's diverse territories, building lay support communities whose patronage it directed rather than into the fire temple economy, providing literate administrative services to a multilingual population that the Magi's Avestan-language priestly training did not equip them to serve — this was, from Shapur's structural position, a lever for managing the constraint. Not by eliminating the Magi's authority in their own territory, where it was too deeply rooted to challenge directly, but by limiting its expansion into the territories where the empire's demographic and economic weight actually resided: the Aramaic-speaking cities of Mesopotamia, the diverse trading populations of the Silk Road approaches, the peripheral territories whose religious pluralism resisted Zoroastrian homogenization.

Shapur never needed to say this. Political actors who benefit from structural arrangements rarely articulate the governance logic of those arrangements, because the articulation is unnecessary — the benefits accrue whether or not the beneficiary names them — and potentially costly, because articulating the calculation gives the constrained party (in this case, the Magi) the explicit acknowledgment of the threat that they could use to mobilize against it. Shapur's letter of protection for Mani was extended in silence about its governance logic, and the silence was itself part of the arrangement's effectiveness. What we can observe is the structure: the priestly establishment was constrained, the competing network was protected, the protection lasted as long as the constrainer was alive. The material interests that structure represents do not require attestation in royal proclamations to be analytically real.

IV.E — The Uighur Experiment: Confirmation from Seven Centuries Later

The structural logic of Shapur's patronage arrangement — a ruler using Manichaean institutional infrastructure to manage the leverage of an established religious establishment — received its clearest historical confirmation not in third-century Persia but in eighth-century Central Asia, where the Uighur Khaganate adopted Manichaeism as its official state religion in 762/763 CE, more than five centuries after Kartir's execution of the tradition's founder. The Uighur case is worth examining with some depth, because it demonstrates something about Manichaean institutional infrastructure that the Persian case, with its compressed timeline, does not have the opportunity to show: the tradition's capacity for adaptation to wildly different cultural contexts without losing its doctrinal coherence.

The Uighur Khagan Bögü encountered Manichaean missionaries following his sack of Luoyang during a campaign that had been fought in support of the Tang Dynasty against the An Lushan Rebellion. The Manichaean missionaries — part of the Sogdian trading community network through which Central Asian Manichaeism had traveled and been sustained for centuries — presented their synthesis to a ruler governing a steppe confederacy whose existing religious practice was a combination of shamanistic traditions and elements drawn from the Buddhist and Zoroastrian communities of the Silk Road cities his people controlled and taxed. The Khagan's adoption of Manichaeism was rapid and comprehensive: he issued an edict requiring Manichaean practice throughout the Uighur domains, commissioned the construction of Manichaean temples, and invited Manichaean clergy to his court in a direct parallel of the Shapur-Mani relationship of five centuries earlier.

What the Uighur case reveals about the Manichaean institutional infrastructure is its adaptability. The tradition that Mani had built with explicit universalist intent — designed to cross cultural boundaries without losing doctrinal coherence, equipped with written canon and portable discipline and two-tier community structure — had in fact achieved exactly what its designer claimed to have designed it for. The Manichaean community that presented itself to Bögü was not a Persian community trying to export Persian religious culture to a Turkic steppe context. It was a Sogdian-Uighur-inflected community that had been translating Manichaean texts into local languages, adapting Manichaean imagery to local aesthetic traditions, and building Hearer networks within the trading communities of Central Asia for generations. The same doctrinal architecture — Light and Darkness, Elect and Hearers, the liberation of divine light particles from material imprisonment — appeared in Sogdian illuminated manuscripts with Zoroastrian-influenced art, in Chinese texts with Buddhist-influenced terminology, and in Uighur temple paintings with steppe aesthetic conventions. The content was consistent. The cultural

expression was local. This was exactly the missionary infrastructure Mani had tried to build from the beginning.

The Uighur state adoption of Manichaeism lasted less than a century. The Uighur Khaganate collapsed under Yenisei Kirghiz attack in 840 CE, and the subsequent persecution of Manichaean communities in Tang China — which had tolerated Manichaean practice among Uighur traders and diplomats but was not prepared to maintain that toleration once the Uighur political relationship collapsed — replicated in compressed form the pattern of the Persian suppression: royal protection withdrawn through succession crisis, institutional network surviving in diaspora beyond the reach of the suppressing authority. Manichaean communities persisted in the Chinese coastal province of Fujian, in syncretized form, for another five centuries after the Tang persecution.

The Uighur experiment confirms three elements of the framework's analysis that the Persian case, given its brevity, can only suggest. First, Manichaean institutional infrastructure was genuinely portable — capable of maintaining doctrinal coherence while achieving cultural adaptation — in a way that fire temple Zoroastrianism or Roman imperial Christianity was not. Second, the succession vulnerability that killed Mani was not a peculiarity of Shapur's dynastic situation; it was a structural feature of any patronage arrangement resting on personal royal support rather than institutional legal embedding. Third, the tradition that survived suppression and displacement was more institutionally robust than the tradition that had been dependent on court patronage — the diaspora Manichaeism of Central Asia and China outlasted the court-dependent Manichaeism of Persia by a thousand years.

Section V: Information Control — The Oral Monopoly, the Written Canon, and the Battle for Interpretive Authority

V.A — The Magi's Information Architecture: Power Through Inaccessibility

The Zoroastrian Avesta — the canonical texts of the tradition — was transmitted through the third century CE primarily as oral tradition, memorized by priests trained through years of intensive education in the specialized schools whose curriculum centered on mastering a liturgical language that was no longer spoken as a vernacular. Avestan, the language of the

oldest Zoroastrian texts including the Gathas attributed to Zoroaster himself, had been a living language perhaps a millennium before Ardashir's dynasty; by the third century CE it was a learned priestly language accessible only through formal training, no more comprehensible to an educated layman reading it cold than Latin is to an English speaker encountering it without instruction. A literate Zoroastrian who could read Middle Persian with fluency could not read the Avestan liturgy without priestly training. The canonical texts were inaccessible by design — not through any deliberately exclusionary policy, but through the organic development of a tradition whose authority had always been embedded in specialist knowledge rather than in texts that laypeople could independently evaluate.

This inaccessibility was the Magi's primary information control mechanism, and it was more powerful than any explicit censorship policy could have been, because it did not require enforcement. The priestly monopoly on religious knowledge was structural rather than coercive: there was nothing to enforce because there was no text available to the layperson that could be read without priestly instruction. The priest was not the guardian of sacred texts kept under lock and key; the priest was the only person who could read the texts at all, which made the question of access moot. Religious authority derived from liturgical performance, and liturgical performance required the Avestan language, and the Avestan language required priestly training. The chain was closed.

The practical consequences of this information architecture for governance of the Zoroastrian community were significant. The Magi's interpretation of theological questions, legal questions, purification requirements, and the ritual calendar was authoritative not because laypeople had evaluated the underlying texts and found it persuasive, but because laypeople had no access to the underlying texts and could not evaluate them independently. Doctrinal disputes within the tradition were resolved by priestly specialists whose authority derived from their training and their position in the priestly hierarchy rather than from any democratic process of community evaluation. The high priest's ruling on a contested question of ritual purity was not subject to challenge by a literate layperson who had read the relevant Avestan texts and reached a different interpretation; it was the final word because he was the only person in the room who could read them.

Kartir understood this architecture and its maintenance was central to his institutional project. His inscriptions describe at length the standards he established for priestly training, the reforms he enforced in liturgical practice, the promotion of qualified priests throughout the empire's

territories. Each of these activities was, from the information control perspective, a quality assurance effort for the institutional monopoly on religious knowledge: ensuring that the priests who constituted the only interface between the canonical texts and the lay population were trained to consistent standards, were performing the rituals correctly, and were not departing from the theological positions that Kartir was in the process of defining as orthodox. A priestly class trained to inconsistent standards or performing variant liturgies would have undermined the monopoly by demonstrating that there was no single authoritative interpretation — which would have opened the question of which interpretation was correct, which would have invited lay evaluation, which would have eroded the structural inaccessibility on which the monopoly depended.

V.B — What Mani's Written Canon Did to the Monopoly

Mani's insistence on writing his own canonical scriptures in accessible languages during his own lifetime was, from the information control perspective, the single most structurally threatening aspect of his mission — more threatening than his universalist claims, more threatening than his two-tier institutional structure, more threatening than his royal patronage. The canonical scriptures in Aramaic and Middle Persian — languages that educated laypeople in the Sasanian Empire could read — were texts whose theological content could be evaluated by anyone with basic literacy. They were not gatekept behind a specialist language. They were not dependent on priestly interpretation for access. They were available to anyone who could read them, or who could hear them read aloud by a literate member of the community.

The implications for the priestly monopoly were direct. A tradition whose canonical texts were accessible to literate laypeople was a tradition whose theology could be evaluated without priestly mediation. A layperson who had read the Living Gospel or the Kephalaia in Middle Persian could form an independent judgment about whether Mani's cosmological claims were coherent, whether his account of the previous prophets' failures was accurate, whether the two-tier institutional architecture made sense as an expression of the underlying soteriology. That evaluation would not necessarily favor Mani — Augustine's eventual departure from Manichaean community was driven by precisely this kind of independent intellectual assessment — but the capacity for independent evaluation was itself a challenge to the structural inaccessibility on which Zoroastrian priestly authority rested. Once laypeople were accustomed to evaluating religious claims through accessible written texts rather than through

the mediation of priestly specialists, the epistemological ground on which the Magi's monopoly stood had shifted.

Mani was aware of this competitive dimension of his written canon, or at least his doctrinal argument about why he had written the canon himself implies awareness of it. His diagnosis of the previous prophets' failures as failures of transmission — his argument that Zoroaster and Jesus and the Buddha had been authentic but their teachings had been distorted by followers who transmitted them without written authentication — was an argument that assigned theological authority to the written canonical text rather than to the institutional tradition that interpreted it. If the canonical text was authoritative and accessible and authentic, then the institution that mediated access to a non-canonical oral tradition was, by the logic of Mani's own theology, in a weaker position than the community that had direct access to the canonical text. The argument was simultaneously a theological claim about the nature of revelation and a structural challenge to the epistemological premise on which the priestly monopoly operated.

V.C — The Avesta Codification Response: Writing as Defense

The Sasanian period is associated with the beginning of a project to commit the Avestan oral canon to writing — a project whose completion lay centuries in the future but whose initiation during the third and fourth centuries CE corresponds, not coincidentally, with the period in which Manichaean competition was most acute and in which the challenges of managing a diverse empire through a priestly establishment whose canonical texts were orally transmitted were most visible. The written Avesta — the texts that survive into the medieval period and constitute the primary source for Zoroastrian theology and liturgy — is not the pre-Sasanian oral tradition directly transcribed; it is the result of a long process of codification, selection, organization, and standardization that began in the Sasanian period and that the tradition itself attributes to Shapur II in the fourth century CE, though the process was certainly more gradual and more complex than any single royal initiative.

The codification of the Avesta can be understood within the framework as a defensive response to the information control challenge that Manichaean written canon represented. An oral tradition whose authority rested on structural inaccessibility was vulnerable to comparison with a written tradition whose accessibility demonstrated that religious truth could be transmitted without priestly mediation. The response was to make the oral tradition written — not, primarily, to make it accessible to laypeople, since the Avestan language remained a priestly specialist

medium — but to give it the permanence and the institutional stability of a fixed written text. A written Avesta was a text that could be compared, authenticated, and defined as canonical against deviant versions in a way that an oral tradition could not be. It was the information control infrastructure of the priestly monopoly adapting to a competitive threat rather than being replaced by it.

Kartir's project of establishing orthodox standards for priestly training and liturgical practice was the organizational precondition for this codification project. Before the canonical texts could be written down in an authoritative form, there had to be agreement on what the canonical texts were — which versions of the hymns were correct, which prayers were required, which ritual procedures were standard. Kartir's career-long effort to standardize priestly practice throughout the empire's territories was building the institutional consensus that a codification project would require. The written Avesta that emerged in subsequent centuries was possible because Kartir and his successors had done the organizational work of making the oral tradition consistent enough to be written down without simply institutionalizing its regional variations.

V.D — The Information Landscape's Suppression Shadow

The sources available for reconstructing the information control dynamics of the Shapur-Mani period are themselves products of the very information control conflict they document, and reading them against the grain reveals patterns that direct reading obscures. Three distinct suppression shadows are visible in the surviving record.

The first is the near-total absence of Manichaean primary sources from the Sasanian Empire itself. The Cologne Mani Codex was found in Egypt. The Kephalaia and the Manichaean Psalm-Book were found at Medinet Madi in the Fayyum, preserved in the dry climate of the Egyptian desert. The great Manichaean textual discoveries from Turfan in Chinese Central Asia and from Dunhuang on the Silk Road represent communities that survived because they were beyond the reach of Sasanian suppression. No Manichaean primary sources have been found in Mesopotamia or Pars — the regions where the mission was born, where Mani lived and preached and built his community. Their absence is not a function of inadequate archaeology; it is a function of the systematic destruction of Manichaean institutional infrastructure that followed Mani's death. The texts survived in diaspora because diaspora communities were beyond the suppressors' reach. They did not survive in the homeland because the suppressors reached the homeland first.

The second suppression shadow is what Kartir's inscriptions are silent about. He describes the religions he suppressed — Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Baptists, Manichaeans — with the categorical confidence of an administrator itemizing a completed task. He does not describe what those communities actually believed or practiced. He does not engage with the theological content of their traditions. He does not address Mani's specific claims about Zoroaster's genuine revelatory status or acknowledge that the Manichaean synthesis had incorporated Zoroastrian elements. The silence is institutionally rational: engaging with Manichaean theology would have required acknowledging that the Manichaean reading of Zoroastrian tradition was sophisticated enough to warrant refutation, which would have implicitly acknowledged its intellectual seriousness and potentially its appeal. The administrative erasure — naming the communities suppressed without examining their content — is more effective information control than theological debate, because it denies the suppressed tradition the legitimacy of being taken seriously.

The third suppression shadow is the most revealing: what the anti-Manichaean polemical literature, written by the tradition's enemies, inadvertently preserves about what made Manichaeism persuasive. The Acta Archelai — a late third or early fourth century anti-Manichaean text presenting a fictional debate between Mani and a Christian bishop — preserves Manichaean arguments in the process of attempting to refute them. Augustine's Confessions and his extensive anti-Manichaean writings preserve nine years' worth of detailed engagement with Manichaean doctrine from the inside. The Zoroastrian Denkard, compiled much later, preserves Manichaean theological positions in the process of arguing against them. Each of these hostile sources is more informative about the Manichaean intellectual tradition than many friendly ones, because each was written by someone who had taken the tradition seriously enough to understand it precisely — and whose refutation required reproducing the arguments accurately enough to make the refutation recognizable.

What these hostile sources collectively document is that Manichaeism was not suppressed because it was intellectually weak or institutionally shallow. It was suppressed because it was institutionally threatening to an establishment with more accumulated political capital and the structural patience to exploit a succession crisis. Augustine's engagement with Manichaean theology treats it as a serious philosophical system whose problems he had to work through carefully over years before finding what he considered adequate responses. The Denkard's Zoroastrian refutations engage with Manichaean cosmological arguments with the seriousness of an opponent who has recognized that dismissal is insufficient. The tradition that Kartir

eliminated in Persia was a tradition whose intellectual content was substantial enough that its enemies felt obligated to argue against it rather than merely denounce it. The suppression was a function of political and institutional factors, not a function of the suppressed tradition's doctrinal weakness.

* * *

Part Three examines what Kartir actually did, from his own inscriptions, and what the military substrate that had been present throughout the arrangement from the beginning looked like when it finally made itself visible.

THE SEAL AND THE FLAME

Mani, Shapur I, and the Politics of Divine Revelation

in Third-Century Persia, c. 216–293 CE

PART THREE

The Flame Speaks, the Seal Is Broken, and the World That Followed

Sometime around 276 CE, Mani died in the custody of the Sasanian state. The exact circumstances are disputed across the sources — the tradition speaks of chains, of a long imprisonment, of death from the physical toll of captivity, and in its more graphic accounts of flaying. What is not disputed is the basic sequence: he was summoned to the court of Bahram I, he was confronted by Zoroastrian priests in a formal disputation, he was placed under arrest, and he died before any outcome other than death became possible. His chief disciples were executed in the weeks that followed. The communities he had built throughout the empire were subjected to suppression campaigns whose extent the surviving evidence documents imperfectly but whose direction is unambiguous. The letter of protection that Shapur I had extended thirty years earlier was not merely expired; it was reversed. The legal status of Manichaean practice moved within three years from royal patronage to capital offense.

The question that Part Three addresses is not whether this outcome was inevitable — the framework's structural analysis suggests it was, given the institutional conditions present — but how it happened, who made it happen, and what the sequence of events reveals about where real political power resided throughout the entire thirty-year period of Mani's mission. The answer, as the framework predicts and the evidence confirms, is that real political power resided where it always resides: with whoever controlled the organized military force that determined which king sat on the throne and whose preferred policies that king could afford to implement. The revelation of that fact was not Mani's execution. Mani's execution was the revelation's confirmation. The revelation itself happened in the moment when Kartir helped Bahram I to the throne over the claims of more legitimate candidates — the moment when the priestly establishment demonstrated that it had accumulated enough political capital to determine succession, and that whoever controlled succession controlled everything that followed from it.

Section VI: Kartir's Counter-Move — The Inscriptions, the Vision, and the Five Conditions

VI.A — Reading Kartir's Inscriptions: A Priest Describes Himself

Kartir's four inscriptions at Naqsh-e Rajab, the Ka'ba-ye Zardosht, Naqsh-e Rostam, and Sar Mashhad constitute the most analytically unusual primary sources in any case study in this series. They are not hagiography written about their subject by admiring followers. They are not administrative records produced by state bureaucracies that can be read against the grain for

incidental revelations. They are not hostile accounts from opponents whose polemical agenda can be stripped away to find the factual residue. They are a man's account of his own career, written in stone by his own commission, at the empire's most prominent monuments, during his own lifetime. Kartir is the only non-royal individual in Sasanian history to have carved independent inscriptions at the sacred rock sites of the Iranian world, and the fact of that privilege — granted first by Bahram I and then extended under Bahram II — is itself the most compressed possible statement of the political achievement his career represented.

The inscriptions are not identical in content. The earliest, at Naqsh-e Rajab, is the shortest and most formulaic: it introduces Kartir, describes his service across successive reigns, and lists his achievements at a high level of generality. The Ka'ba-ye Zardosht inscription — carved directly beneath Shapur I's great trilingual text, in Middle Persian only, unlike the bilingual or trilingual format of most Sasanian official inscriptions — is more specific about institutional achievements. The Naqsh-e Rostam inscription, longer than either of the preceding two, elaborates both the career narrative and the theological justification for his authority. And the Sar Mashhad inscription, the longest, the most elaborate, and the most revealing for the framework's analytical purposes, contains all of the above plus something that none of the other inscriptions contain: Kartir's account of a personal journey to the afterlife.

Before arriving at that account, the inscriptions provide detailed documentation of what Kartir built and what he destroyed, in his own characterization. He established sacred fires throughout the empire's territories, including regions that Shapur I's military campaigns had brought under Sasanian control — Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia — where no Zoroastrian institutional presence had previously existed. He organized the priestly hierarchy, defined standards for priestly qualification, established judicial courts operating on Zoroastrian legal principles, and promoted qualified priests to positions throughout the empire. He brought Zoroastrian religious practice to communities that had not previously been incorporated into the priestly institutional network. And then, in language whose enumeration carries the flat administrative confidence of a bureaucrat cataloguing completed tasks: he suppressed non-Mazdayasnian communities throughout the territories under his authority. Jews. Buddhists. Hindus. Nazarenes. Christians. Baptists. Manichaeans. The Sar Mashhad inscription names them all as having been 'struck' in the land. The verb is not metaphorical.

What the inscriptions do not provide, and what their silence on this point illuminates analytically, is any engagement with the theological content of the traditions they enumerate as suppressed.

Kartir does not address Mani's cosmological system. He does not respond to the argument that Zoroaster was a genuine prophet whose teaching Manichaeism had incorporated and completed. He does not engage with the Manichaean critique of Zoroastrian priestly orthodoxy as institutionalized distortion of an original revelation. The enumeration is administrative rather than theological: these communities existed, they have been dealt with, the task is complete. This silence is not ignorance; Kartir was sufficiently sophisticated about the religious landscape of his empire to have understood Manichaean theology at some level of detail. It is a choice about how authority is most effectively exercised. An administrator who responds to theological challenge through theological counter-argument has implicitly conceded that the challenge is worth engaging; an administrator who responds through suppression and enumerates the suppressed communities in the same list as practitioners of other eliminated religions has classified the theological challenge as an administrative problem and dealt with it as such.

VI.B — The Journey to the Afterlife

The Sar Mashhad inscription's most extraordinary passage describes an experience that Kartir underwent — or reported undergoing — at some point during his career, an account he considered important enough to carve in the longest and most prominent of his four inscribed monuments. The text is damaged in places and its interpretation has been debated by scholars, but its general outline is recoverable: Kartir journeyed to the realm beyond ordinary experience, accompanied by a figure described as his spiritual double or heavenly counterpart, and in this journey he witnessed the reality of the cosmic order that Zoroastrian theology described. He saw the paradise that awaited the righteous and the punishment that awaited those who had followed wrong teachings. He encountered figures who confirmed for him that what he had spent his career building and defending was cosmologically correct, that the fires he had maintained and the priests he had organized and the communities he had suppressed were all actions consistent with divine order. He returned from this journey with the personal, experiential certainty of a man who had not merely accepted the tradition on institutional authority but had verified its claims through direct encounter with the reality those claims described.

The account is narrated in the same register of confident personal testimony that Mani's community used to record Mani's revelations from the heavenly Twin. Both accounts describe a human being making contact with a divine counterpart or guide. Both describe a journey into a reality normally inaccessible to human perception. Both describe the acquisition of knowledge through direct experience rather than through institutional transmission. Both describe a return

to ordinary life bearing authority that derives from the encounter rather than from prior hierarchical position. The structural parallel is precise enough that it cannot be accidental in any meaningful sense — not because Kartir was deliberately mimicking Mani's claim-form, but because both men were drawing on the same cultural tradition of shamanic journey narrative that was available throughout the Iranian world and that provided the recognized form for accounts of access to divine knowledge.

The mechanism that underwrote Mani's authority — the personal visionary encounter with a heavenly being that confirmed the mission and authorized the teaching — was the same mechanism that Kartir deployed to authorize his suppression of Mani's community. The form of the claim was identical. What differed was the institutional infrastructure behind the claimant: Mani had thirty years of royal protection, a growing international community of Elect and Hearers, seven canonical scriptures, and missionaries from Egypt to China. Kartir had the fire temples he had been building for fifty years, the priestly hierarchy he had organized across the empire, the judicial apparatus he had established, the four kings whose succession he had navigated, and — at the critical moment — the political capital to determine who became the next one. The vision was the form of authority. The institutions were its substance.

VI.C — The Succession Operation: How Bahram I Came to Power

Shapur I died in 270 CE. The succession to the throne was not straightforward, and the details of how it resolved illuminate the political mechanism that killed Mani more clearly than any theological or personal narrative can. Shapur's son Hormizd I succeeded him and continued his father's broadly tolerant religious policies — Kartir's inscriptions acknowledge receiving the ceremonial insignia of upper-class status from Hormizd, a gesture of recognition without the substantive administrative authority Kartir wanted. Hormizd died after approximately one year. He was followed by Bahram I, who was not the most obvious candidate for the succession by conventional dynastic criteria. The sources do not provide a clear account of exactly how Bahram I's claim prevailed over competing candidates who might have had stronger formal claims, but Kartir's own inscriptions make his role in the outcome visible: he describes his relationship with Bahram I in terms that go well beyond the routine priestly-royal relationship, and his subsequent accumulation of power and titles under Bahram I has the character of a reward for services rendered rather than of routine institutional development.

What Kartir had been building throughout Shapur's reign was not merely fire temples and priestly networks; he was building political capital in the specific form most valuable for succession politics — relationships with members of the royal family and the military aristocracy that could be activated at the moment when succession became contested. A chief priest who had spent thirty years performing the investiture ceremonies, the military campaign blessings, and the major royal yasnas for the dynasty had accumulated relationships with every significant military commander and aristocratic household in the empire. He had provided ritual services whose political value — the cosmic sanction of military victory, the divine blessing of the king's authority — was something the aristocracy needed regardless of which particular king they supported. He was the one institutional figure whose services both sides in any succession dispute would want, which gave him leverage in exactly the situations where leverage was most consequential.

The result of Bahram I's accession was a rapid realignment of royal religious policy. Within two years of Shapur's death, Mani was summoned to the court. The summons came with the explicit involvement of Zoroastrian priests who organized a formal religious disputation — a confrontation between Mani and the priestly establishment of the sort that Shapur's protection had prevented for thirty years. Mani was old by this point, in his late fifties or early sixties, his health reportedly compromised by the years of his mission. The outcome of the disputation is not described in neutral sources — we have the Manichaean account of a prophetic figure facing his accusers with dignity, and the implication in various sources that the theological confrontation was largely a pretext for a decision already made on political rather than doctrinal grounds. Mani was placed under arrest. He died in custody. His senior disciples were executed. The institutional network he had built over thirty years of royal protection was subjected to the suppression campaign whose administrative outcomes Kartir enumerated in stone.

VI.D — The Five Conditions: Why the Suppression Succeeded Completely

The framework identifies five conditions whose simultaneous presence is associated with successful suppression of a belief system. In most cases the analysis shows some conditions present and others absent, and the outcome is correspondingly mixed — partial suppression, diaspora survival, institutional transformation rather than elimination. The Shapur-Mani case is distinctive in the series because all five conditions were met with unusual completeness, which explains why the suppression succeeded not merely in the Sasanian heartland but in producing

the near-total elimination of organized Manichaean institutional presence across the empire's territories.

The first condition is unified elite commitment sustained across generations. Kartir had spent fifty years building exactly this: a priestly hierarchy whose institutional identity was organized around Zoroastrian orthodoxy and whose material interests were aligned with the elimination of competitors, organized through a network of fire temple endowments and judicial appointments that gave the priestly establishment a direct material stake in the continuation of its monopoly. When Kartir activated this network against the Manichaean community, he was not improvising a response to an unexpected threat; he was deploying an institutional infrastructure specifically designed for this purpose, built over decades, and embedded in the social fabric of every significant community in the empire's Iranian heartland. The commitment was multi-generational because the institutions Kartir built outlasted him — the fire temple network, the priestly training system, the judicial apparatus — and those institutions continued the suppression policy under subsequent Sasanian rulers without requiring Kartir's personal direction.

The second condition is geographic containment of the resistance. The Manichaean community in the Sasanian Empire in 270 CE had achieved significant growth under royal protection, but it had not achieved the kind of geographic embeddedness that would have made suppression a multi-front problem. Its strongest communities were in the Aramaic-speaking cities of Mesopotamia — geographically concentrated, institutionally young, without the deep local roots that would have required a suppression campaign of the sustained territorial sweep that the framework identifies as the most difficult suppression scenario. The Elect communities could be reached and their leadership decapitated. The Hearer communities, without Elect support, lost the institutional core that made Manichaean community life distinctive and were unable to maintain the tradition's practice without it. Geographic containment was achievable because the community, despite thirty years of growth, had not yet distributed itself beyond the reach of a centralized suppression campaign.

The third condition is target vulnerability. The Manichaean community had no military capacity, no political allies outside the patronage relationship that had just terminated, and no institutional infrastructure that existed independently of the Elect leadership that Kartir was in the process of eliminating. The Elect's ascetic discipline — which was among the tradition's most attractive features to potential adherents — was simultaneously its greatest institutional vulnerability: a community whose spiritual specialists could not bear arms, could not organize resistance, and

depended entirely on lay support for their material survival was a community that could be suppressed by arresting its leadership and depriving the remaining Hearers of the institutional context that had made their community life meaningful. The Hearers could not sustain the tradition without the Elect; the Elect could be arrested; the tradition in Persia accordingly collapsed.

The fourth condition is the application of overwhelming and sustained force sufficient to destroy institutional infrastructure rather than merely inconvenience it. Kartir's suppression campaign was not a series of warnings and mild discouragements; it was the systematic elimination of Manichaean leadership followed by the destruction of Manichaean texts, temples, and community infrastructure throughout the empire's territories. The Manichaean sources that survive from outside the empire's reach describe the persecution in terms of execution and destruction rather than mere prohibition. The absence of any Manichaean primary sources from the Mesopotamian heartland — the region of the tradition's birth and its strongest institutional presence — is the suppression shadow that documents the campaign's thoroughness more precisely than any account of specific acts of destruction could.

The fifth condition is the multi-generational persistence needed to prevent institutional recovery. Kartir's suppression was not a single campaign followed by relaxation; it was the initiation of a policy that the Zoroastrian state-church he had built continued to enforce under subsequent rulers. Bahram II extended Kartir's powers and titles, making him supreme judge of the empire and steward of the Temple of Anahita — positions that gave him judicial and religious authority over the entire population. Under Bahram II, Kartir's inscriptions describe not merely the suppression of Manichaeans but the broader project of establishing Zoroastrian orthodoxy as the exclusive legitimate religious practice throughout the empire, a project whose legal and institutional dimensions required exactly the sustained multi-generational commitment that the framework identifies as necessary for suppression to achieve permanence. The suppression did not relax when Kartir died; the institutions he had built continued it without him.

Section VII: The Military Substrate — Where Power Actually Resided

VII.A — Shapur's Dominance and What It Concealed

The thirty years of Mani's mission were politically possible because of a specific and non-repeatable fact: Shapur I was one of the most militarily dominant rulers the Sasanian dynasty ever produced, and his personal dominance gave him political space that his successors did not inherit. The man who captured Valerian — who held the hand of a Roman emperor and had that grip carved into the rock at Naqsh-e Rostam for all time — was not a king who needed to negotiate his religious policy preferences with his priestly establishment. He had the military prestige to impose his preferences on a priestly class that depended on his protection and could not plausibly mobilize against him while he was alive and dominant. Kartir's inscriptions acknowledge this constraint obliquely: describing Shapur's reign as a period of service without adequate reward, Kartir was documenting the political reality that Shapur's military dominance had kept the priestly establishment in a position where its preferences could be managed rather than determinative.

What this dominance concealed was the underlying structural fact that had not changed: the military was still the substrate on which everything rested, and the military's relationship to the king derived from command hierarchy and material interest rather than from theological conviction. The soldiers who built Shapur's fire temples on royal commission and who escorted Manichaean missionaries on royal instruction were the same soldiers who would, under a different king with different instructions, arrest those missionaries and destroy those communities. They were not Zoroastrian partisans; they were professionals whose loyalty followed command and payment rather than doctrine. The appearance of religious pluralism under Shapur was the appearance of a king's personal preferences being operationalized through a military apparatus that had no independent ideological investment in those preferences. When the king changed, the apparatus's operational outputs changed with him.

Mani's community — and, one suspects, Mani himself — understood the fragility of this arrangement in principle even while depending on it in practice. The Manichaean sources' careful preservation of the account of Mani's royal audience with Shapur, the emphasis on the great honor with which the king received him, the documentation of the years spent in the royal retinue — all of this suggests a community that understood the patronage relationship as the foundation of their institutional existence and that commemorated its establishment as a matter of foundational importance. Communities do not preserve biographical details of royal audiences with the care that Manichaean tradition preserved Mani's unless those details are understood as institutionally constitutive — unless the community understands that its own existence is in some fundamental sense a consequence of that encounter. The preservation is

accurate: the community's existence in Persia was a consequence of the encounter, and the community knew it.

VII.B — Kartir as Kingmaker: The Priest Who Controlled Military Succession

Kartir's achievement in making Bahram I king — and his subsequent role in ensuring that Bahram II followed Bahram I rather than the competing candidate Narseh — was the completion of a strategic project that had been building throughout his entire career. The project was not the accumulation of theological authority, though that accumulated as a byproduct; it was the accumulation of political capital in the specific form that made succession outcomes controllable. A chief priest who had performed the investiture ceremonies of multiple kings, who had blessed the military campaigns that had built military commanders' careers and reputations, who had administered the religious law that governed the personal status of every aristocratic family in the empire — this was a figure whose cooperation any candidate for the throne needed and whose opposition any candidate could not easily survive.

The political genius of Kartir's position was that it did not require him to control military force directly. He did not command an army. He was, by some accounts, a eunuch — a man specifically excluded from the military aristocracy whose cooperation he was cultivating. What he controlled was the legitimating function that made military force politically effective: the investiture ceremony that transformed a successful military coup into a legitimate kingship, the priestly blessing of succession that transformed military victory into cosmic sanction. In the Sasanian political theology, a king without priestly investiture was a warlord; a warlord with priestly investiture was a king. Kartir held the capacity to make that transformation, which meant that every military commander who aspired to kingship had to calculate the cost of Kartir's opposition and the value of his support.

Narseh — the candidate who had been passed over twice through Kartir's interventions, who eventually took the throne by military force in 293 CE precisely because he had sufficient military backing to overcome the institutional machinery that had blocked him — provides the limit case that defines the boundary of Kartir's power. When Kartir's accumulated political capital was deployed against a candidate with enough military backing to override institutional opposition, the military won. Narseh's seizure of power was possible not because Kartir was wrong about the value of priestly support but because Narseh had assembled sufficient military force to make priestly support secondary. And Kartir's subsequent disappearance from the

historical record — present in the Paikuli inscription as one endorser among many of Narseh's legitimacy, absent from later inscriptions, fading into irrelevance within years of the succession — documents what happens to an institutional power broker when the military calculus shifts. The priest who had made kings could not prevent a king from being made without him when the candidate had enough soldiers. The military substrate is always the substrate.

VII.C — The Compressed Timeline and the Structural Clarity It Provides

The Shapur-Mani case's most distinctive contribution to the series is the compressed timeline that makes the military substrate's operation unusually visible. In the Ashoka case, fifty years separated the founding of the dhamma program and its collapse; the long timeline allowed the program to accumulate the appearance of institutional durability before the military resolved the question. In the Sudan Islamist case, the relationship between the military and the belief program played out over decades of accumulating tension before the structural logic asserted itself in Bashir's eventual marginalization of Turabi. In the Shapur-Mani case, the entire arc from patronage to execution to diaspora survival occurred within approximately twenty-five years of the patron's death — Shapur died in 270 CE, Mani died around 276/277 CE, the suppression campaigns were effectively complete by the late 270s and early 280s CE.

The compression is analytically valuable because it eliminates the ambiguity that longer timelines create. When a belief program collapses after fifty years, it is possible to construct narratives in which contingent factors — the specific personalities of individual successors, particular political crises, external military pressures — share the explanatory burden with structural factors. When a belief program whose entire institutional existence consisted of a single king's personal patronage collapses within six years of that king's death, contingency has less room to operate. The structure — the letter that was not a law, the protection that was not institutionally embedded, the competing establishment that had been patiently building its counter-capacity throughout the thirty years of tolerance — was sufficient to produce the outcome without requiring any extraordinary political skill from Kartir or any unusual weakness in Bahram I. The ordinary operation of the structural factors was enough.

Section VIII: Long-Term Consequences — Augustine, the Diaspora, and What the Framework Reveals

VIII.A — The Shape of What Survived: The Diaspora Religion

The Manichaean tradition that Kartir's suppression eliminated from the Sasanian Empire did not disappear from the world; it dispersed. The communities that had been established in the Roman Empire by Adda and Pattig and the other missionaries Mani had sent westward during Shapur's reign were beyond the reach of the Sasanian suppression machinery, and they continued to grow, adapt, and absorb new adherents for a century after their founder's execution. The communities that had been established along the Silk Road by Manichaean missionaries moving eastward through the Parthian successor territories were similarly beyond reach, and they would eventually produce the great Central Asian and Chinese Manichaean traditions whose textual legacy, recovered from Turfan and Dunhuang, provides much of what we know about Manichaean doctrine in its fully developed form. The suppression eliminated Manichaeism from its homeland precisely by driving its practitioners to the places where they would be forced to build the independent institutional infrastructure that the homeland communities, sheltered by royal patronage, had never needed to develop.

This is the diaspora paradox that the Ashoka case also produced, and its reappearance here confirms that it is structural rather than coincidental. A belief system whose institutional existence depends on royal patronage is a belief system whose survival horizon equals the patron's political horizon. A belief system expelled from patronage and forced to build independent institutional foundations — to develop lay community support networks that sustain the tradition through voluntary commitment rather than through state resource flows, to translate canonical texts into local languages, to establish community practices that can be maintained without centralized administrative supervision — is a belief system with a longer and more resilient survival horizon because its institutional existence is distributed across a network that no single political act can destroy in its entirety.

The Manichaean communities of North Africa, where the tradition had established its strongest Western presence by the late third century, were precisely this kind of institutionally independent community. They had no royal patron. They had no state protection. They had, in fact, the active hostility of the Roman imperial state, which began systematic persecution of Manichaean communities under Diocletian in 302 CE with an edict ordering the burning of Manichaean texts and the execution of Manichaean leaders — a suppression campaign whose five conditions were not all present, as subsequent events would demonstrate, but whose ambition was total. The North African communities survived Diocletian's persecution, continued to grow through the

fourth century, and produced at Carthage and in the surrounding region the most intellectually sophisticated Western Manichaean communities the tradition ever developed. One of the young men who joined those communities around 373 CE was a rhetorician from Thagaste in Numidia named Augustine, and his nine years as a Manichaean Hearer would leave marks on Western Christian theology that persisted long after he formally abandoned the tradition and made the refutation of Manichaeism a central project of his subsequent career.

VIII.B — Augustine's Manichaeism: What Persuaded Him and Why It Left

Augustine was twenty-two years old when he encountered Manichaeism, and the encounter was intellectual before it was institutional. His account in the Confessions of why Manichaean teaching persuaded him begins with the problem that had been troubling him since his adolescence and that Catholic Christianity as he understood it at the time seemed unable to answer: the problem of evil. Where does evil come from? If God created all things and God is good, why does the world contain such obvious and overwhelming suffering, moral degradation, and material horror? The Catholic answer he had received — that God permitted evil for purposes beyond human comprehension, that evil was a consequence of human free will — struck the young Augustine as philosophically inadequate, a retreat into mystery where reason demanded an answer.

The Manichaean answer was architecturally cleaner. Evil was not a problem to be explained within a single-creator theology; it was the second of two eternal principles, the Realm of Darkness that had always existed as the counterpart to the Realm of Light. The world's suffering was not God's mysterious permission of what he could have prevented; it was the direct consequence of the cosmic collision between these two principles, the mixture of light and darkness that produced the material world and everything in it. Human moral failure — the experience Augustine knew intimately from his own life, the sexuality that he could not control, the ambition that drove him, the habits of pleasure that he could not simply choose to abandon — was not a mystery requiring theological explanation. It was the expected behavior of divine light imprisoned in dark matter, the light yearning for its source while the darkness of the material body pulled in the opposite direction. The divided self that Augustine experienced as his most intimate and distressing personal reality had, in the Manichaean framework, a cosmological explanation that was both intellectually coherent and personally resonant.

For nine years, Augustine was a Hearer — not taking on the full Elect discipline, which his own description of his life during this period makes clear he was not prepared to adopt, but participating in the community's life, attending the teachings of the Elect, and accepting Manichaean theology as his working cosmological framework. He read Manichaean texts. He debated Manichaean theology with Catholic opponents. He brought friends and associates into the tradition. He was, in short, a committed participant in exactly the kind of Hearer community that Mani's institutional architecture had been designed to sustain and that had proved capable of maintaining itself without royal patronage in the North African context.

His departure from the tradition was triggered by an encounter with its astronomical claims. The Manichaean cosmological system made specific statements about the nature of celestial bodies — statements that derived from the doctrine that the sun and moon were cosmic instruments of light's liberation, traveling the heavens collecting released light particles and carrying them toward the Realm of Light. These claims generated specific predictions about celestial behavior that Augustine tested against the astronomical knowledge available to an educated person in the late fourth century — specifically, the work of Cicero and the classical tradition of astronomical observation that was accessible in Latin. He sought out Faustus of Milevis, the most learned Manichaean teacher in North Africa, hoping to resolve the inconsistencies he had identified. Faustus was a man of considerable personal charm and rhetorical skill but limited astronomical knowledge, and his inability to resolve the inconsistencies — his gracious acknowledgment that he could not answer the technical questions — was the moment Augustine later identified as the beginning of his disillusionment. He did not leave immediately; the Confessions is careful to note that he continued in the community for some time after the encounter with Faustus. But the authority structure of the tradition — which rested on the canonical texts' claims to comprehensive cosmic truth — had cracked at the point where its cosmological assertions met empirical challenge.

VIII.C — The Manichaean Problems That Shape Augustine's Christian Theology

Augustine eventually found his way to Neoplatonic philosophy and then to Catholic Christianity under the influence of Ambrose of Milan, and his conversion in 386 CE became one of the foundational narratives of Western Christian intellectual history. But the specific shape of the Christian theology he constructed over the subsequent four decades — the theology of original sin, the theology of grace and predestination, the anthropology of the divided will, the ontology

of evil — bears at its core the marks of the problems he had learned to think about during his nine Manichaean years and that he never stopped thinking about afterward.

The problem of evil — which Manichaeism had answered with cosmological dualism — Augustine resolved in his mature Christian theology through the doctrine of evil as privation: evil is not a positive principle coequal with goodness but an absence of goodness, a corruption of something that was originally good, a deficiency rather than a substance. This answer is developed explicitly against the Manichaean positive-evil thesis in Augustine's anti-Manichaean writings, which means that the Manichaean cosmological framework is the intellectual pressure against which his Christian ontology is defined. The privation theory of evil that became standard Western Christian doctrine for a millennium was formulated in direct engagement with a tradition that had posed the theodicy problem with unusual sharpness. Mani's cosmology shaped Augustine's ontology by being the specific alternative against which Augustine's alternative had to be built.

The divided self — the experience of willing one thing and doing another, of knowing the good and failing to pursue it, of moral intention consistently subverted by bodily desire — was in the Manichaean framework a cosmological fact about the nature of human existence in a mixed world. In Augustine's Christian framework it became the doctrine of original sin and concupiscence: the wound inflicted by Adam's fall, transmitted through sexual reproduction to all subsequent humanity, producing the structural incapacity of the fallen will to reliably choose the good without divine assistance. The phenomenology is the same in both accounts — the divided self, the gap between intention and action, the experience of being pulled in two directions simultaneously — but the etiology differs. For Mani, the division is constitutive and cosmic; for Augustine, it is historical and moral, a consequence of a specific originating act rather than an eternal structural feature of existence. Augustine's doctrine of original sin is a Christian answer to a question Manichaeism had posed with unusual philosophical precision, and it carries the shape of that question in its structure even while rejecting the Manichaean answer.

Most significantly: Augustine's theology of grace and predestination — the doctrine that human salvation depends entirely on divine grace freely given rather than on human merit or effort, that God's election of the saved precedes and determines rather than responds to human choices, that the human will in its fallen state is incapable of turning toward the good without the prior intervention of divine grace — was developed in a theological context where the Manichaean

account of the soul's situation provided the sharpest available challenge. If the soul is a particle of divine light imprisoned in dark matter, its liberation is a cosmic process that it undergoes rather than achieves; the Elect's ascetic practice and the Hearer's almsgiving participate in a liberation that is structurally guaranteed by the cosmological order rather than contingent on anything the soul individually manages to will or choose. The radical passivity of the Manichaean soul with respect to its own liberation — the soul as the site of a cosmic drama rather than the agent of its own salvation — recurs in transformed form in Augustine's theology of grace as an account of human salvation that places the effective causation entirely outside the human will. The soul is saved by grace alone, not by anything it does; the parallel with the light particle liberated by cosmic processes rather than by its own effort is structural rather than direct, and Augustine would have rejected it as a characterization. But the two accounts are answering the same question with the same basic architecture: the effective cause of salvation is not the individual will.

The reach of this into subsequent Western Christianity is immeasurable in scope. Augustine's theology of grace and predestination was the direct source for Calvin's doctrine of double predestination; the Reformed tradition that produced the Protestant Reformation's most theologically systematic expression was built on foundations that Augustine had laid in direct engagement with Manichaean problems. The Catholic tradition's subsequent development — the Council of Trent's articulation of the relationship between grace and free will, the Jansenist controversy of the seventeenth century, the continuing theological debates about predestination and human freedom that persist into contemporary Catholic theology — is in large part a sustained working-out of the tensions that Augustine's anti-Manichaean theology had introduced into the Western Christian framework. Mani died in 276/277 CE. His cosmological problems are still being argued in seminaries.

VIII.D — What the Framework Predicted and What the Evidence Confirms

A case study in this series has analytical value proportional to how precisely it tests the framework's predictions and what it forces the framework to add. The Shapur-Mani case makes five specific predictions and produces two additions to the cumulative analytical structure that were not visible in previous cases with sufficient clarity to state explicitly.

The first prediction: a belief system whose institutional existence depends entirely on personal royal patronage, without independent legal embedding or autonomous institutional

infrastructure, will collapse within one generation of the patron's death. The Manichaean community in Persia was eliminated within six years of Shapur I's death. The prediction is confirmed with a compression that makes the structural necessity unusually visible — the six-year timeline eliminates most of the contingent noise that longer timelines allow and leaves the structural relationship between patronage dependency and institutional fragility as the dominant explanatory factor.

The second prediction: when all five conditions for successful suppression are present simultaneously, suppression succeeds and is sustained across generations. The five conditions in the Shapur-Mani case — unified elite commitment, geographic containment, target vulnerability, overwhelming force, multi-generational persistence — were all present in unusually pure form. The prediction is confirmed, and the Sasanian suppression's subsequent extension under Bahram II and Shapur II documents the multi-generational component that the framework identifies as necessary for permanence rather than mere interruption.

The third prediction: the military is the substrate on which all belief-based governance rests, and military succession is the mechanism through which priestly institutional capital is converted into political outcomes. Kartir's career is the clearest single demonstration in the series of this principle in operation: fifty years of institutional accumulation, deployed at the succession moment that converted priestly political capital into royal policy change, with the execution of a prophet as the direct outcome. The Narseh succession — where sufficient military backing overcame Kartir's institutional opposition — simultaneously confirms the prediction by demonstrating its limit: priestly capital can determine succession when military capacity is roughly balanced, but when military capacity is unambiguously decisive, the military wins regardless of priestly preference.

The fourth prediction: the belief system expelled from state patronage and forced to develop independent institutional infrastructure achieves greater long-term durability than the system sustained through patronage dependency. The Western diaspora communities — surviving Diocletian's persecution, producing Augustine's intellectual formation, generating the North African theological tradition — confirm this. The Central Asian communities — adapting to Sogdian, Uighur, and Chinese cultural contexts while maintaining doctrinal coherence, surviving the Uighur collapse and the Tang persecution to persist in Fujian into the fourteenth century — confirm it more dramatically. The Manichaean tradition's global survival horizon, after the

Persian patronage arrangement ended, exceeded the Persian arrangement itself by more than a millennium.

The fifth prediction, and the framework addition that this case forces into explicit statement: the legitimating mechanism — the personal encounter with divine truth that authorizes the claimant's teaching and institutional position — is not specific to prophetic challengers or to sincere believers or to new movements. It is a formal structure available to all participants in the political competition over religious authority, deployable by whoever has the institutional position and political capital to make the claim stick. Kartir's afterlife journey and Mani's Twin revelation are the same formal claim in different hands. What determined which claim produced authority and which produced death was not the quality of the vision, not the depth of the experiential encounter, not the sincerity of the claimant's conviction. It was the fire temples and the priestly hierarchy and the succession politics and the soldiers. The vision was the form. Everything else was the substance. And the substance was always, in the end, the same thing it always is.

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This case study is part of the collection *Patterns of Power: Systematic Analysis of Elite Control Mechanisms Across Civilizations*